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ABSTRACT

The booklet describes the local history component of an interdisciplinary high school course on American Studies. The program involves students over a three-year period in collecting, recording, organizing, interpreting, and disseminating the history, culture, and tradition of Scituate, Rhode Island. The booklet is presented in six chapters. Chapter I stresses that local and state history should be taught in high school and discusses how this project can be adapted to the needs of other school systems. Chapter II emphasizes the need for teaching about historiography and outlines a unit on historical method. Chapter III suggests sources of information for local history projects, including local libraries, social organizations, newspaper files, town clerk's offices, family records, state or local historical societies, recorded interviews, and local historical sites. Chapter IV suggests student activities such as field trips, interviewing local citizens, workshops, and disseminating information about the project in the community. Chapter V recommends equipment and materials such as cameras, film, slide projectors, and cassette tapes. The final chapter offers suggestions for evaluating local history projects. Evaluation procedures should include pre- and posttests on historiography and local history, standardized tests on U.S. history and American literature, and questionnaires dealing with student interest in the project. (Author/DB)

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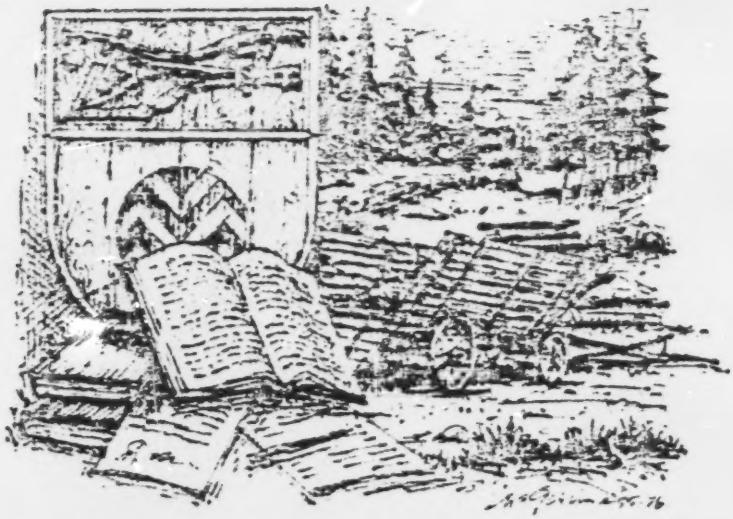

PROCESS GUIDE

For student involvement in Historical Research

prepared by

Project Heritage
Scituate Jr./Sr. H.S.
N. Scituate, R. I.

SP 010 659

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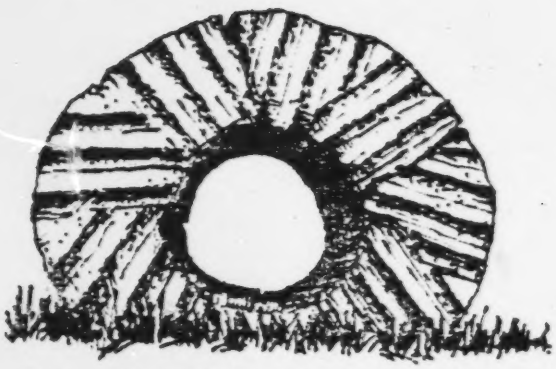


INTRODUCTION

Project Heritage is a three year program, funded by Title III, which involves approximately thirty high school students in collecting, recording, organizing, interpreting, and disseminating the history, culture, and traditions of the Town of Scituate, Rhode Island. The project is an integral part of the present elective course of American Studies, an interdisciplinary course of American Literature and United States History.

This brief booklet is intended to provide fellow educators with a general overview of the planning and operations of a local history project. It is the writers' contention that local and state history have been nearly completely overlooked in school curricula and that more than token notice

should and must be given to these areas. Although Project Heritage was specifically designed to meet the needs and circumstances of a particular school, the project can be readily adapted to fit the needs of other school systems. It is our hope that this process guide will provide some benefit to school systems interested in incorporating historiography and local history into their school curricula.

1. HISTORIOGRAPHY

One of the most necessary steps in an instructional program concerned with a local history project is the development of a unit on historiography. All too often, teachers are of the opinion that minimal skills are needed and that their students can engage in research with little, if any, preparation. The instructors of Project Heritage did not accept this fallacy and spent considerable time developing a two week teaching unit on Historiography which was presented in the early phase of the project. This unit included:

1. the nature of history and historiography
2. the various types of historical works

3. the historical method

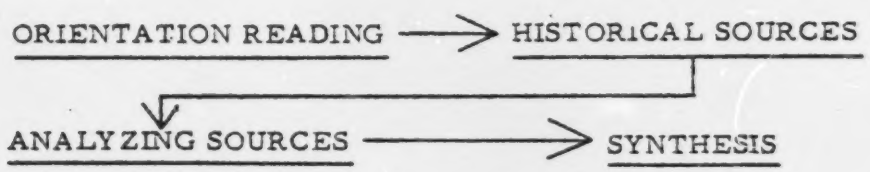
4. the application of historiography to the actual writing of an historical work

Teachers who may be interested in initiating a program similar to that of Project Heritage may become disheartened by the scarcity of published works on the historical method. Among those which the staff found most useful were Commager's "The Nature and Study of History", Garraghan's "A Guide to Historical Method", and Stephen's "Probing the Past".

Our experience with student research leads us to strongly recommend a systematic approach to history which was described by Allan Nevins as:

> The historian collects his data fairly, observes it systematically, organizes it logically, and tests its' parts thoroughly. Then by inductive logic and the use of hypothesis he reaches provisional generalizations, and only when he has carried out a final search for new data, and made fresh tests, does he commit final conclusions to paper.

The basic historiographical approach which our experience leads us to recommend can be illustrated in the four step process of:



As previously emphasized, teachers must not take it for granted that high school students have sound knowledge of the various types of sources and of the potential and limitations of various data. To most high school age

students, research simply implies the collection and organization of factual material which they can locate in encyclopedias, secondary and Tertiary published works, and magazine and journal articles.

Instruction must include the description and illustration of primary and secondary materials and their respective values and limitations. In addition, students should be aware of the necessity of investigating and analyzing not only narrative sources, but also official records, oral sources, artifacts and pictorial material.

Considerable time and effort must be spent in instructing the students in the proper analysis and synthesis of historical material. Our staff utilized class lectures, films, various types of class exercises, and critical analyses of published works in history. The staff would also recommend the conducting of a student workshop on historiography with a guest speaker who has had actual experience in historical writing.

This experienced speaker should be able to provide students with an understanding of the application of the principles of historiography to the actual writing of an historical work and with the techniques of historical writing.

The students of Project Heritage, after a thorough orientation and instruction in historiography, were divided into research groups of approximately five members. The task of each group was to thoroughly research and synthesize their findings on a major topic of local history (i.e., original purchase, economic development, prominent families) which had been previously selected by the class and instructors. Throughout the year, this group conducted independent research and utilized the techniques of historiography with which they had become familiar in the traditional classroom setting. The final written synthesis of the group research will ultimately become major chapters of the student written history of Scituate.

2. INVESTIGATION

Sources of information are as diverse as the community in which you live. Large amounts of information will appear in unexpected places. The key to a successful hunt, therefore, lies simply in getting started. Your first tentative investigations will reveal additional sources, which in turn will reveal others, and so on in almost a geometric progression. So, where to begin?

Local libraries -- often repositories of unpublished, uncataloged information. In our case a number of monographs were discovered, all written forty years ago on the occasion of the state's settlement tricentennial.

Local fraternal or social organizations -- a second potential source

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including groups such as the Grange or the Masons.

Newspaper morgues -- be sure to check on any papers which have ceased publication or which once covered your area as well as those which are currently active.

Town or city clerk's office -- records include tax data and minutes of town meetings. We found a hand written manuscript covering local history up to 1900.

State or local historical societies -- one of the best places to turn not only for historical data but also for helpful suggestions from the personnel there.

Family records -- with a little bit of advertising all sorts of letters, maps, and photographs can be brought forth. One word of caution--be prepared to deal with the sudden rush of information. Be ready to schedule contacts with people and to have their material duplicated.

Recorded interviews -- long time residents are a wealth of information. Although the data must be cross-checked for accuracy, there is no more interesting source of information. The stories and vignettes they relate can be found no where else.

Local historical sites and cemeteries -- valuable not only as primary sources but also as a means of expanding student's concepts of what constitutes a primary source.

3.

PROJECTS

The project is based on several assumptions. The first of these is that history is an active, vibrant process rather than a static, dessicated table of information to be memorized and regurgitated. One aim of the project, therefore, is to involve students in that process--doing rather than memorizing. Student activities, therefore, are the essence of the project rather than auxiliary frills.

The activities to be used in compiling a local history should be as broad and varied as the imagination of the staff and students will allow. The activities to be described, then, are simply suggestions for beginnings.

The first of these student activities are those usually classified as

field trips. Such trips are a most valuable learning instrument but structure should be an essential part of these trips. A field trip should not be just a day out of school. For example, a visit to a re-created village such as the one in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, should be accompanied by activities similar to the one on the attached sheet. If at all possible, the project staff should visit the intended field trip area first--well in advance of the students to make sure that any field experience is closely related to local history. Speak with any available resource people. Most heavily visited areas have personnel more than happy to assist you. Obviously in writing a local history, visits to nearby sites are required. Again careful planning is required. Two such activities in particular have proven successful in the project. The first activity is the visiting of local historical cemeteries where students record all available tombstone data. Collectively this data provides students with the opportunity to form historical hypotheses and questions. For example, at what ages do deaths most frequently occur? Do these periods of mortality correlate with other phenomena such as childbirth? What are the headstones made of? Where did they come from? How did they get there? What families seem prominent? What ethnic groups are represented? The list of questions and hypothetical answers are virtually endless.

A second successful activity centers on local architecture. With several classes of preliminary instruction on architectural techniques, students visit selected houses and buildings, examining the structures as historical documents. The structures themselves give information and pose further questions. What are they made of? Where did the materials come from? What sort of craftsmen were necessary to construct them? What does the building say about the economic status of its owners? Again, the possibilities go on and on.

Another worthwhile student activity is that of interviewing local citizens, recording their comments on tape. Several words of advice are appropriate here. First, some instruction in interviewing techniques should be given. Many of the people whom they are interviewing are elderly and the student interviewers must be prepared to cope with problems associated with old age. Practice with role-playing partners is a big help in that direction. Second, it must be impressed on the students that the willingness of people to cooperate with them imposes on the interviewer several obligations such as making appointments well in advance and showing up on time. Third, students must be taught that interviews require a good deal of preparation. Questions are prepared in advance. Interviews are not just spontaneous chit-chat but rather should reflect a methodical plan of action. Fourth, all taped interviews should be immediately identified, classified and labeled. In addition a written abstract of the subject matter should be provided as an assistance to future researchers.

PROJECT HERITAGE FIELD TRIP EXPERIENCE

"STURBRIDGE VILLAGE"

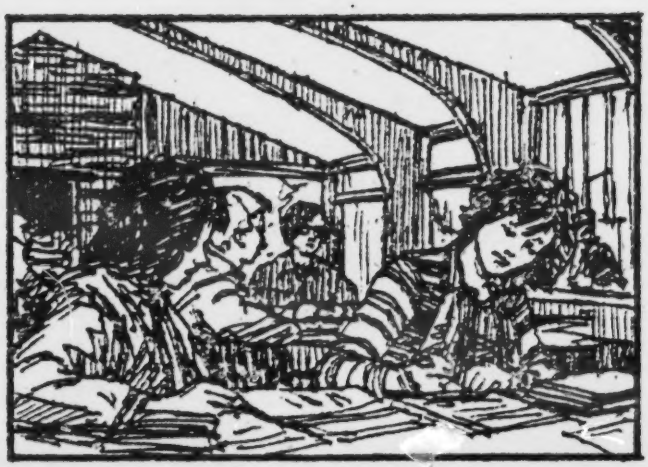
Sturbridge Village is a recreation of a typical New England community of the late 18th and early 19th century. It is expected that this field experience will provide some insight into a life style similar to that which Scituate residents experienced during this period of history.

The class will be broken down into groups of two students. Each team will be assigned one of the following community residents which it will personally interview. Suggested questions which the interviews can center on are: What is a typical day for you like? Where did you get the materials used in your work? What did you pay for them with? What are your life aspirations? What do you do for entertainment? Where were you born? Where was your family originally from? What do you require in the way of goods and services from the community? What do you contribute to the community?

Oral presentations will be made to the class and written reports submitted following the field trip.

Community Residents:

school teacher
blacksmith
farmer
farmer's wife
farm laborer
cooper
tin smith
miller
wool carder
minister
lawyer
general store operator
potter
banker
sawmill operator
printer
silversmith

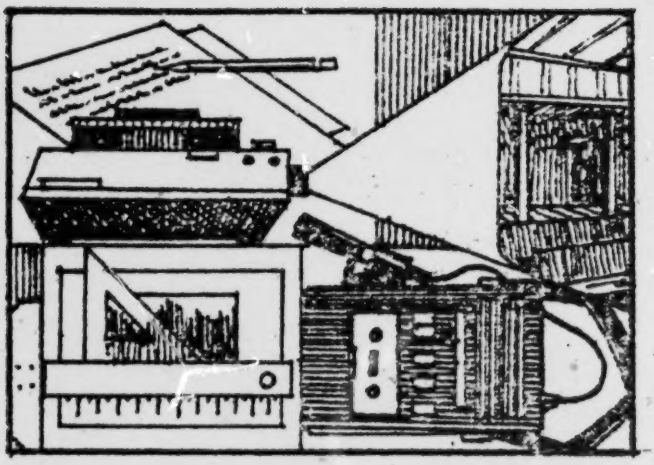


Still another student activity which has proven successful involves workshops. Experience has shown that these are most successful if held away from the school. The project workshops thus far have been held in an instructor's home after school hours and at a nearby conference center during school hours. Workshops have served three general purposes. The first is planning. What do we intend to do and what are the best means of accomplishing our goals? Student input is essential here if the students are to clearly see the validity of what they are about to do. A second workshop purpose involves dissemination of information usually as a kick-off activity for the year. Local speakers rather than project staff are the best center of attention here. Speakers who this project has employed in the past include

a local amateur historian, a local cartographer and surveyor, an elected town official with 50 years in office, and a graduate student specializing in state industrial development. Students should be prepared to deal with such speakers. They are, for the most part, not accustomed to public speaking and their presentations may require close attention to detail by the listeners. Some difficulties can be minimized, however, by carefully reviewing with the speakers in advance the topic to be covered and the expected time frame. The third workshop purpose is that of evaluation. A candid session between students and staff on project progress is a most refreshing and valuable experience. Workshops in this third group should be held at regular intervals rather than just at year's end.

One more activity for students is that of disseminating information about the project in the community. The most successful and "marketable" activity is a slide-tape presentation. Many civic groups such as Lion's Clubs and Rotary welcome such a presentation. In addition, these presentations are welcome at local Elementary and Middle schools. Several advantages grow from these programs. First, the project students are proud of their work, glad to show evidence of it, and enjoy the recognition that public programs provide. Second, the presentations help to make the project more a community effort than just a school project. A good deal of the information the project will come across will be unearthed because someone at a slide-tape show became aware of the project for the first time. Third, these efforts awaken the curiosity of younger students and help to insure continued student interest in the project. In general, then, these presentations represent good public relations which go a long way toward insuring project success.

Virtually all of the project activities have been most successful if done in a group situation. Activity groups of from two to five students seem to work best. Apparently peer pressure, reinforcement and collective intelligence work better than individual effort responsible only to a teacher.



4. EQUIPMENT

The amount of equipment necessary for local historical research is rather nominal, most of which may already be on hand within the local system. The project staff's experience leads us to recommend the purchase of:

1. 35 mm camera -- The visual record is not only important from an historical point of view but is invaluable in constructing in-progress presentations to local community groups. Depending on the scope of the project and available funds, an Instamatic or a Polaroid may be just as useful and versatile.

2. Film with a wide range of ASA settings to allow for varying light conditions. Color slide film is recommended because of the economy involved and the ease with which slides will fit into presentations.

3. Flash Attachment

4. Camera extension tubes and a photo-copy stand for close up work of old documents and photographs.

5. Free standing screen*

6. Tape recorder*

7. Slide projector*

8. Tape recorders -- student interviews with the local citizenry require several tape recorders. The easiest to work with are those with built in condenser microphones. Although the quality of sound reproduction is not the very best, their relatively low cost and ease of operation make them the best choice.

9. A supply of cassette tapes. Since many of these tapes will contain one-of-a-kind interviews, they should be kept as a permanent record even after the written history is completed.

In planning a local history project one must not forget to include funds for the following:

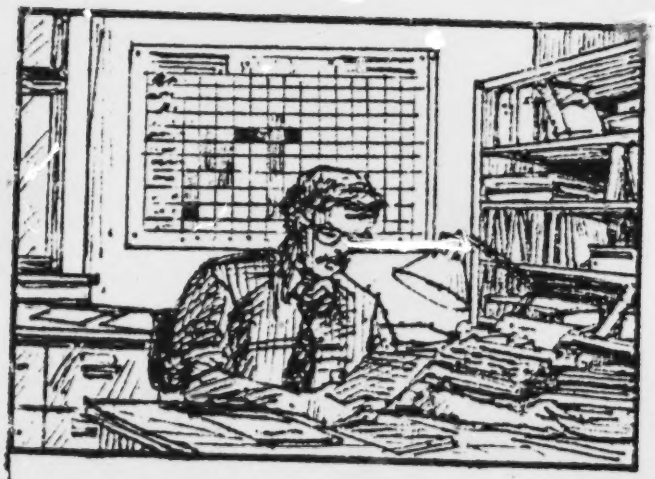
1. developing film

2. duplicating or Xeroxing documents

3. publishing or printing the history

4. advertising in local news media asking those who have historical information or original sources to reveal them for project use.

* A necessity if community presentations are planned



5. EVALUATION

All educational projects must include an evaluation component which consists of various procedures intended to determine the degree to which the program objectives have been accomplished. This evaluation component must be geared to the specific objectives of the program and obviously cannot be constructed until the objectives have been determined.

To evaluate the program the staff of Project Heritage, with the assistance of the CRDC of the University of Rhode Island, devised an evaluation procedure which consisted of the following elements:

1. Teacher constructed pre and posttests on historiography.
2. Teacher constructed pre and posttests on Scituate history.

3. Standardized tests on United States History and American Literature. These norm referenced tests were administered, on a pre and post test basis, to determine whether the additional time and work devoted to local history either enhanced or detracted from their achievements in their study of United States History and American Literature.

In addition to these suggested tests, the staff would recommend that a local history program include a student questionnaire which would serve as a process feed-back mechanism to the project staff. This questionnaire should focus on study techniques used, sources consulted, merits of various techniques and sources, and the worth of project activities.

Student evaluation sheets should be constructed and utilized at various points in the year's program. These evaluations should include questionnaires concerning such topics as the quality of speakers, value of specific learning activities and student attitude changes. In addition, it is recommended that frequent informal student-teacher sessions be conducted to assess the student's perception of the success or failure of the overall learning experience. Results from these formal and informal evaluations should be considered as vital feed-back to the project staff and should be used as the base for any decisions regarding a modification of the overall objectives or the learning program.

This particular project has been centered on a great deal of independent student research. To enable the staff to provide some degree of internal monitoring a simple but highly successful procedure was devised. We would suggest that similar programs incorporate a student monitoring system on:

1. Monthly progress reports submitted to project staff. These narrative reports should include a description of the progress which the group has made towards accomplishing its ultimate objectives and any pitfalls which were encountered.

2. Frequent student-teacher conferences concerning the accomplishments, progress and problems experienced by the students.

The specific evaluation design and continuous monitoring by project staff, Title III personnel, and the CRDC has provided the project staff with two invaluable categories of information:

1. The degree to which the project objectives have been accomplished. Evaluative results indicate that the project is enriching the students understanding and appreciation of American Literature and United States History while simultaneously introducing them to historiography and the history and culture of their locality. It is our contention that the project has important side benefits which are difficult to measure. Among these are increased motivation, an understanding of group dynamics, and a sense of responsibility.

2. Feedback from students and objective evaluative data which can be utilized to modify project objectives and activities.